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Notes of a Naturalist. John Muir in Alaska-Wrangel Island and its Picturesque Attractions. Summer Days that Have No End-Pictures of Sound Life. Life Among the Indians-Boat Life-Wild Berries. (Special Correspondence of the Bulletin.) Fort Wrangel, Alaska, August 8, 1879.

John Muir

NOTES OF A NATURALIST

JOHN MUIR IN ALASKA — WRANGEL ISLAND AND ITS PICTURESQUE ATTRACTIONS — SUMMER DAYS THAT HAVE NO END—PICTURES OF SOUND LIFE—LIFE AMONG THE INDIANS—BOAT LIFE—WILD BERRIES.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

FORT WRANGEL, Alaska, August 8, 1879.

Wrangel Island is one of the thousands of picturesque bits of this cool end of the continent carved out of the solid by the ice of the glacial period—not by separate glaciers such as now load the mountain tops and flow, river-like, down the valleys, but by a broad, continuous ice-sheet that crawled slowly southward, covering all the land and much that is now sea, grinding on unhalting through unnumbered seasons, and modeling the comparatively simple and featureless pre-glacial landscapes to the marvelous beauty and variety of the present day.

The island is about fourteen miles long, separated from the mainland by a narrow channel or fiord, and trending north and south in the direction of the flow of the ancient ice sheet. From the tops of its highest hills down to the water's edge all around it is densely planted with coniferous trees that never suffer thirst in all their long century lives, that never have been wasted by fire, and have never yet been touched by the ax of the lumberman. Abundance of snow keeps them fresh and lusty through the winter, abundance of rain and soft, shady clouds makes them grow luxuriantly through the summer, while the many warm days, half cloudy, half clear, and the little groups of pure sun-days, enable them to ripen their cones and perpetuate the species in surpassing strength and beauty.

ALASKAN FORESTS AND GLACIERS.

The forests and the glaciers are the glory of Alaska, and it is not easy to keep my pen away from them. Nevertheless, I want to try to sketch this little far-away town and its people, and will gladly return to the trees and the ice some other time, after I have observed further.

A ROUGH PLACE.

Wrangel is a rough place, the roughest I ever saw. No wildcat mining hamlet in the grizzly gulches of California, or in the remote recesses of the sagebrush State, approaches it in picturesque, devil-may-care abandon. It is a moist dragglement of unpretentious wooden huts and houses that go wrangling and angling along the boggy, curving shore of the bay for a mile or so, in the general form of the letter S, but without manifesting the slightest subordination to the points of the compass, or to building laws of any kind whatever. Stumps and logs block its two crowded streets, each stump and log, on account of the moist climate, moss-grown and grass-tufted on their tops, but muddy and decaying at the bottom and down their sides below the limit of the hog-line. The ground in general is a degraded bog, oozy and slimy, too thin to walk in, too thick to swim in. These picturesque obstructions, however, are not much in the way, for no wheels of wagon or carriage ever turns here. There is not a horse on the island, and but one cow. The domestic animals are represented by a few hogs of a breed well calculated to deepen and complicate and complete the mud, and a sheep or two, brought on the steamer for mutton.

Indians, mostly of the Stickeen tribe, occupy the two ends of the town; the whites, of whom there is perhaps about forty or fifty, the middle portion, opposite the wharf; but there is no determinate line of demarcation, the dwellings of the Indians being mostly as large and as solidly built of logs and planks as those of the whites.

THE FORT.

The fort is a quadrangular stockade with a dozen block and frame buildings, located upon dry, rising ground just back of the business part of the town. It was built shortly after the purchase of Alaska by our own government, and was abandoned in 1872—reoccupied by the military in 1875, and finally abandoned and sold to private parties in 1877.

In the Fort and about it there are a few good, clean homes and people, golden nuggets of civilization which shine all the more brightly in their sombre surroundings. The ground occupied by the Fort, by being drained around the outside, is dry and wholesome, though formerly a portion of the general swamp; showing how easily the whole town could be made clean, at least as far as the ground is concerned. Were it removed as it is to the sunshine of California, with all its miry squalor, it would become a reeking centre of pestilence? but here beneath shady clouds, and washed by cool rains and the fresh briny sea, it is ever safely salubrious. Although seeming to rest uneasily among mire and stumps, the houses squirming at all angles, as if they had been tossed and twisted by earthquake shocks, leaving but little more geometry in their relations to one another than may be observed among the moraine blocks of a glacier, yet Wrangel is a tranquil place—tranquil as the lovely bay and the islands outspread in front of it, or the deep evergreen woods behind it. I have never yet heard a noisy brawl among the people, nor a stormy wind in the streets, nor a clap of thunder, or anything like a storm-sound in the waves along the beach. At this summer season of the year the abundant rain comes straight down into the lush vegetation, steamy and tepid. The clouds are usually united, filling all the sky, not racing along in threatening ranks, suggesting energy of an overbearing de-

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ENDLESS DAYLIGHT.

The very brightest of Wrangel days are not what Californians would call bright. The sunshine is always tempered in sifting down through the moist atmosphere, allowing no dazzling white glare. The town, like the whole landscape, rests beneath this hushing spell. On the longest days the sun rises about 3 o'clock, but it is daybreak at midnight. The cocks crow when they wake, without much reference to the dawn, for it is never dark. Cock-crowing is the one certain, invariable sound peculiar to civilization, but there are only a few, half a dozen or so, all told, of full grown roosters in Wrangel to awaken the town to give it christian character. After sunrise a few smoke columns may be seen rising languidly to tell the first stir of the people. Then an Indian or two may be noticed here and there at the doors of their big barn-like cabins, and a merchant getting ready for trade; but scarcely a sound is heard, only a muffled stir gradually deepening. There are only two white babies in town as far as I have seen, and as for the Indian babies, they wake and feed, and make no crying sign. Later you may hear the strokes of an ax on firewood and the croaking of a raven.

A SUMMER SCENE.

About 8 or 9 o'clock the town is awake and on its legs and in its boats. Indians, mostly women and children, begin to gather in scores on the front platforms of the half dozen stores, sitting carelessly in the blankets every other face blackened hideously, a naked circle around the eyes, and perhaps a spot over each cheek-bone and on the tip of the nose where the smut has been weathered off. Some of the little children are also blackened and none are overclad, their light and airy costume consisting of a calico shirt reaching only to the waist, as if even this flimsy material were sorely scanty, the whole weighing, when dry, about as much as a paper collar. Boys eight or ten years old often have an additional garment—a pair of castaway miner's overalls. These also are wide enough and ragged enough for extravagant ventilation. The larger girls and young women are quite brightly and extensively calicoed, and wear jaunty straw hats, gorgeously ribboned, which glow among the blackened and blanketed old crones like scarlet tanagers in a flock of blackbirds.

ALASKA WOMEN—FISHING AND HART HUNTING.

Most of the women who load the store fronts can hardly be called loafers, for they have berries to sell, basketfuls of huckleberries, red and black, and of the large yellow salmon berries and bog raspberries, all looking fresh and clean, relieved most strikingly amid the surrounding squalor. They sit and wait purchasers until hungry, when, if they cannot sell them, they eat them, and go to the hillside back of the town to gather more.

Yonder you see a canoe gliding out from the shore containing perhaps a man, woman and a child or two, all paddling in easy, natural rhythm. They are going to catch a fish, no difficult matter, and when this is done their day's work is done. Another party puts out to capture bits of driftwood, for it is easier to procure fuel in this way than to drag it down from the woods through the bushes.

SOCIAL TRAITS—ALASKAN WILD BERRIES.

As the dozy day advances there is quite a fleet of canoes seen along the shore, all fashioned after one pattern, high and long beak-like prows and sterns, and with lines as fine as those about the breast of a wild duck. What the

mustang is to the Mexican vacquero the canoe is to the Coast Indians. They skim along the glassy sheltered waters to fish and hunt and trade, or merely to visit their neighbors, for they have family pride remarkably developed, and are extremely sociable, meeting often to inquire after each other's health, to hold potlatches and dances, and to gossip concerning coming marriages, deaths, births, or the last murder, and how many blankets will be demanded as blood-money, etc. Others seem to sail for the pure pleasure of the thing, their canoe decorated with handfuls of the large purple epilobium. Yonder you may see a whole family, grandparents and all, making a direct course for some island or promontory five or six miles away. They are going to gather berries, as the baskets tell. I never before in all my travels, north or south, found so lavish an abundance of wild berries as here. The woods and meadows are full of them, both on the lowland and far up the mountains among the glaciers—huckleberries of many species, salmon berries, blackberries, raspberries, currants and gooseberries; with service berries in the opener places and cranberries in the bogs, sufficient for every bird, beast and human being in the Territory, and thousands of tons to spare. The huckleberries are specially abundant. A species that grows well up on the mountains is the best, the largest being nearly an inch in diameter and delicious in flavor. These grow on bushes about a foot high. The berries of the commonest species are a little smaller and covered with a bluish dusty bloom, and grow almost everywhere, on bushes from three to six or seven feet high. This is the species on which the Indians most depend, gathering them in large quantities and pressing them into cakes about an inch thick for winter use. The salmon berries are also preserved in the same way, after being beaten into a kind of paste, at least so I have been told. The species is quite generally distributed throughout the woods and along stream-banks. I have seen some specimen berries measuring an inch or more in diameter. Delicious raspberries ripen around warm openings and rocky places, and along the edges of meadows and streams not too heavily shaded. Various gooseberries too, attain a fair size, while some of the red currants equal those of the gardens in size, and excel them in flavor. These last should be cultivated by those enthusiastic fruit growers who, with their thousand species and varieties already under cultivation, are still looking eagerly into the wilderness for more.

TRADE—MINING.

Most of the permanent residents are engaged in trade. Some little trade is carried on in fish and furs, but most of the business of the place, and its real life, is derived from the Cassiar gold mines, some two or three hundred miles inland, by way of the Stickeen river. Two stern-wheel steamers ply on the river between Wrangel and the head of navigation, 140 miles up, carrying freight and passengers, and connecting with pack trains which make their way into the mining region over mountain trails.

These mines, placer diggings, were discovered in the year 1874. About 1,800 persons are said to have passed through Wrangel this season for the mines, about one-half being Chinamen. Nearly one-third of the whole number set out from here in the month of February, traveling on the Stickeen river, which usually remains safely frozen until towards the end of April. The main body of the miners go up on the steamers in May and June.

On account of the severity of the winter, all are compelled to leave the mines about the end of October. Perhaps two-thirds of all engaged pass the winter in Portland, Victoria and in the little towns on Puget Sound. The rest remain here, dozing away the long winter as best they can.

I want to say a line or two about the missionaries here, some of whom are devoting themselves to the Indians, while others seem to be devoting themselves to themselves. This letter, however, is already too long.

BUILDING—A FASCINATING REGION.

The steamer *California* arrived this morning, bringing the monthly mail and a large quantity of freight for the mines and building material for a Presbyterian church in course of erection here. I had intended leaving Alaske for the present on her return trip, and spending the remainder of the season in Washington Territory and Oregon. But I have found so much to interest me in this noble wilderness, and so much kindness among the people, that I shall stay awhile longer and push back as far as I can into the mountains by any way that offers.

JOHN MUIR